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FREDERICTON (CNB) -- To mark its 30th anniversary, the New Brunswick Human Rights Commission has published Equality in Action - the New Brunswick Human Rights Commission: 30 Years in Review, 1967-1997. The book chronicles the evolution of human rights in New Brunswick over the past three decades.

"The commission can look back over the past three decades with a sense of pride and accomplishment on its outstanding record in the protection and promotion of human rights," commission chair Constantine Passaris said. "It provides us with a solid foundation to build upon for the future."

In 1967, when New Brunswick became the second province to adopt human rights legislation, blacks in Saint John still faced widespread discrimination in jobs, housing and public establishments such as nightclubs, restaurants and theatres. The anti-discrimination laws first adopted in the '50s were ineffective, largely because there was little public awareness of them and no agency dedicated to their enforcement.

The Human Rights Act of 1967 prohibited discrimination based on race, creed, colour, nationality, ancestry or place of origin. It applied to employment, public accommodation and publicity. In subsequent years, the act was extended to housing and professional associations, and discrimination based on sex, marital status, physical and mental disability, age and sexual orientation was prohibited.

The act is administered by a human rights commission. The commission is responsible for conducting research and educational programs to promote equality and eliminate discrimination. It also investigates complaints and attempts to settle those which could be substantiated. If the parties are irreconcilable, a case can be referred to a hearing before a board of inquiry. If discrimination is found, a remedy can be ordered.

The commission consists of a board of members from across the province that meets regularly, mainly to consider discrimination complaints. Dr. Noël Kinsella, now a senator, was the commission's first chair in 1967. He remained in that capacity until the current chair, UNB professor Constantine Passaris, assumed the position in 1989. Day-to-day activities are carried out by the commission's staff, based in Fredericton, Moncton, Saint John and Campbellton.

During its first years, the commission's work focused mainly on racial discrimination, but sex discrimination complaints generally predominated once sex discrimination was prohibited for the first time in the early '70s. Mandatory retirement cases took the spotlight in the late '70s. Sexual harassment,

which came to prominence in the '80s, now consistently represents about a quarter of the complaints filed. During the '90s, sexual orientation has been a contentious issue and workplace stress has given rise to more frequent complaints.

In 1987, to better focus on the commission's proactive educational mandate, a separate branch was dedicated to educational activities. Over the years, the Education Branch has published teachers' guides and other books on human rights, as well as several information brochures. It delivered hundreds of workshops and presentations in a variety of settings and organized a number of national, provincial and local conferences. The branch also conducted several essay and poster contests, as well as an audiovisual and a Web site contest.

The Education Branch has also produced a number of videos. The latest is the four-program Vision for Equality series, which was co-produced by the commission and Fundy Communications.

In addition, the commission assists employers and agencies who seek its advice with respect to human rights issues and policy development and sponsors research on the nature and extent of discrimination and various other human rights issues.

Equality in Action is the commission's latest major publication. The 114-page book is illustrated with several black-and-white photos. Copies are available from the NB Human Rights Commission in Fredericton at 506-453-2301.

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EDITORS NOTE -- Copies of Equality in Action may be obtained from Karen O. Taylor at 506-453-2063; Constantine Passaris, chair, may be reached at 506-453-2301.

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